

The Dark Knight

By WILLIAM SMITH

(Continued from Page Six)

just in time to receive another blow from the drunken Reggie's fist.

For an instant the young westerner seemed about to spring at his antagonist. Then his face became stern.

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He stepped back from the table and stood breathing hard.

At the start of the hostilities the other guests in the party had leaped to their feet expectantly. But when Rod failed to return Reggie's blows they sank back into their chairs.

"Aw he's a damn coward," Reggie muttered. "I oughta sock him again." He advanced, half staggering toward Rod, who turned his back on him and started away.

Lyla arose coolly and took Reggie's arm. "Come on my cave man," she commanded. "What you're going to do is dance with me." Reggie laughed

foolishly, and allowed himself to be guided toward the dance floor. As she passed Rod her eyes held a look of contempt. "Coward," they seemed to say. Rod dropped his head.

Wave on wave of the throbbing music filled the room. Rod felt a sudden disgust with the whole affair. He left the table to push his way ruthlessly through the thick crowd on his way to the checkroom for his hat.

A sudden commotion in front of him attracted his attention. The crowd parted just in time to allow him to see a hawk nosed, saffron skinned man, with evil, leering eyes, snatch Lyla out of Reggie's embrace. Reggie stood regarding the other man foolishly, then started uncertainly toward him, only to shrink back as the latter snarled viciously.

Lyla's face was twisted with fright. She pushed desperately at her captor, who by now held her tightly in his arms, but he only laughed, and drew her closer. Couples around the pair laughed ostentatiously. A dissipated looking youth close by grinned fawningly and said: "Wolf's done took another gal away from her man. He can get away with anything."

Rod smashed savagely through the clustered dancers as he had smashed his way through opposing teams when he had played halfback for his college. In an instant he reached them. He jerked Lyla deftly out of her captor's arms, and pushed her behind him.

The man called Wolf grinned evilly. "Come on sucker," he grated confidently. "You're gonna get hell knocked out of you!"

Rod didn't wait for a second invitation. Swiftly he feinted at the Wolf's head, then ripped a trip-hammer blow to his stomach. Rod's opponent bent double in agony at which the youth promptly crashed a short, lightning-like punch on his jaw. The fight was over, as Wolf dropped heavily to the floor.

Then Lyla's scream caused the victorious youth to leap to one side just in time to dodge a sweeping blow from a heavy set, dark man who leaped suddenly at him out of the crowd. People stampeded off the floor wildly. Lyla stood watching in fascinated horror as two more men closed in on the bronze youth.

The heavy set man who had first struck at Rod was thrown into striking distance by the impetus of his own blow. Rod danced lightly away then suddenly forward to land a straight, hard blow to his assailant's temple which sent him sprawling to the floor. As the wide shouldered youth weaved swiftly in and out of his attacker's reach Lyla found herself marvelling at his grace, which was like that of a young tiger. Curiously the thought came to her that he was more graceful fighting than dancing. On his face there was a strange, half-smiling look, as though he were remembering other such battles—and as though he were getting a savage pleasure out of conflict.

His fists shot out to meet his opponents' bodies with piston-like precision, and with similar force. One of them knocked another of the men into a crumpled heap, where he lay twitching in pain. Toward the remaining man Rod leaped lithely. That one cast a frightened look at his enemy and attempted to flee from the floor only to receive a crushing blow on his head which sent him skidding into the crowd which hovered at the edge of the dance floor.

Back of the victorious young warrior Wolf sat up dazedly, then his

glazed eyes quickened with ominous intelligence. Deliberately he drew a blue-steel automatic from beneath his coat. And with equal deliberation he aimed the weapon at Rod. The latter, unaware of his danger, turned to look around for Lyla.

END OF CHAPTER ONE.

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